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THE HUMILIATION OF 'SEX WITH OPTIMISM': FIELDNOTES FROM TINDER



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In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman invoke the rubric of “sex without optimism” to explore options beyond the “normative function” of sex “as the mechanism of emotional cohesion that sustains heteronormativity” (2014, 13). They specifically link the “implication of sex in the normative logic of optimism” to “the presumption of sovereignty,” which they claim is disturbed by “an encounter with the estrangement and intimacy of being in relation” (xiii–xiv, viii). The question of whether optimism disavows “what’s unbearable in negativity” gets to the nub of the matter, pointing to the role of optimism in our capacity to bear or surmount “what overwhelms us in ourselves and in each other” (ix). This vital but often ordinary “experience of relation” links our capacity to be in the world to our vulnerability within it (viii–ix). The relation between nonsovereignty and negativity, self-certainty, affirmation or agency (our hope for a better life; our capacity to get through it) is constantly at play in our sexual ethics and aesthetics. Whatever sex might be, for each of us, and in whatever context, the authors suggest, sex foregrounds a dynamic relation between optimism and its other. Berlant and Edelman thus develop the rubric of “sex without optimism” to retrieve, examine and extend sexual and social possibility. Here, I use their rubric as a springboard from which to think about how the relations among optimism, nonsovereignty, and negativity might set up a kind of sister affective structure—that of humiliation. I cannot yet make claims beyond suggestions regarding the

status of humiliation as itself an affective and discursive structure—autonomously or vis-à-vis optimism—although the work I undertake here is pursuant to this aim.

Sex without optimism also raises questions regarding the specific role of gender and sexual difference in how our cultural structures of humiliation are forged. Gender might be a blunt instrument with which to critically take on and address the fantasy of sovereignty, and no doubt there are reasons why Berlant and Edelman themselves do not pursue this path. Within normative optimism at least, the “putative sovereignty” that is defended from the risks of negativity brought on by “enjoyment” is, surely, epistemologically masculine (and white, etc.) (8). I would posit that the fantasy of sovereignty that governs how we encounter sex (our optimism about sex) is highly gendered, and that this gendering is important to the reification of patriarchal heterosexuality; (another time, we might also consider the implications of optimism too for heterosexuality’s counter-discourses). For one, the paradoxical experience of being anchored and overwhelmed is quickly absorbed by the discursive notion of the *tension* between / among ‘the sexes.’ By which I mean to say, our ways of expressing vulnerability / affirmation, from the minor to the major, do nothing less than constitute the aesthetics of gender; (what is “gender” if not, at least in some respect, the ways we get attached—to one another and in the world, and each attachment vis-à-vis the other?). The gendered structure of optimism, as a condition of possibility for humiliation, comes to inform the gendering of structural / individual humiliation. So, rather than faithfully pursue Berlant and Edelman’s rubric of “sex without optimism”—a very clever project, but beyond what I can advance here—I stay on sex *with* optimism, notably in its manifestations of “cruel optimism,” to find ways of giving texture to the cultural context that humiliates (Berlant 2011).

My writing here is experimental and proceeds by way of example, experience, and a weak reference to the “politics of location” (Rich 1986, 210). The dating platform Tinder, in its generation of new aesthetic categories that apparently break with “narrative knowledge and knowledge as narrative,” while purportedly speaking to / seeking out the pleasures and availabilities of sex, lends itself well to a study of the emergent formations of sex with, and without, optimism (Berlant and Edelman 2014, 3). Indeed, whatever our prejudices about the app (and Tinder is ripe for prejudice of all sorts, particularly in its barrage of aesthetic judgements), Tinder’s scenes are at the forefront of transformations in sexual relations. I want to admit, however, that I did not intentionally seek out an object through which

to examine how ‘sex’ intensifies “that which is structurally nonsovereign,” or approach Tinder in the cold light of day as an object of research (Berlant and Edelman 2014, 5). Rather, my engagement with Tinder’s emergent textuality is co-incidental to my practice of writing: “notes from the field” just happened. Nonetheless, in having taken up feminist theory as a “movement for change [that] lives in feelings, actions, and words” many years ago, my practice of writing was *a priori* open to Tinder’s affective circuits (Rich 1986, 223). That is, my practice of writing, like my experience of Tinder, embodies “the constant pressure to adjust that is at the heart of being nonsovereign” (Berlant and Edelman 2014, 6). So, what I have written here occurs from within “structures of digital feeling” and exposes something of “the continuous lines that compose numerous intersecting durations of the experiential” (Seigworth 2015, n.p.). While it’s awfully grand to invoke Michel Foucault in this way, not to mention perplexing (what would he make of Tinder?), I think that not only in writing but in sex too, “one writes to become other than what one is,” and that this formulation of the nonsovereignty of sex and writing expresses an optimism for their forms (Foucault 1985, 104). However, Tinder takes the risks and fallout invited by this nonsovereignty to new proportions. If “[w]hatever circumscribes or mutilates our feelings makes it more difficult to act” (Rich 1986, 223), and if heteronormativity is just such a circumscriber in its “attempts to snuff out libidinal unruliness” (Berlant and Edelman 2014, 4), then my ruminations that follow here—on the *theatre*, *circuits*, *status* and *stakes* of “sex with optimism”—seek to provoke the “intersecting durations” of these proportions, among other things (Seigworth 2015, n.p.).

#1. Theatre

We are in the love scene now.

Laura and Alec stand facing the audience; though really, they *face one another* as the love scene plays out in their faces.

Is there anything more intimate than the face of a lover? I don’t mean the faces a lover makes (!), but the face of the lover’s emotion. Fear shimmers in Laura’s eyes—there is a dark side to her longing. She relinquishes herself as much as she finds her freedom. There is no going back, and she has the most to lose. It’s the 1940s, she’s “a woman in love,” and an adulterous one at that (Beauvoir 1949). This particular love story is also likely to emanate from the closet of homosexual love experienced by its writer, Noël Coward.

I am, for a moment, confused and hesitant. I don't recognise this scene from the film, and consummation is a deciding factor in any love story. With this ecstatic union, what will happen next? Might the story be thrown off course? Or does Emma Rice—writer of the theatrical adaptation of the film *Brief Encounter* (Lean 1945), itself an adaptation of Coward's original screen play *Still Life* (1936)—believe that within the film this union really takes place, 'behind closed doors'? In the end the play stays true to the film, only bringing the love scene out of the closet of the 1940s to make more vivid on stage the emotion of falling in love. For, in 2018, despite all that we know now, all that has happened, we are taken by a love that is still, somehow, innocent of the very social conditions on which it comments. Especially so where these conditions shore up love's failed promise.

Facing the audience but really facing one another, Alec and Laura undress in synchronicity and slow motion. Like mime artists, they dance the intensity of succumbing. They absorb the melodic tenderness of *Go Slow, Johnny* (Coward 1961) into their movement—the expression of the song through the characters' undressing animates the scene. The crescendo of love's emotions gathers intensity from each of the scene's components, including us the audience. Drawn into the ensemble, we become ourselves crescendo elements, loved up. We're too heart-broken for the characters to feel we are voyeurs of a private emotion.

As her lover returns to his wife, Laura is taken into a terrible darkness. What life is left for her, within her marriage? From the breaking of her heart a power emerges—she rediscovers herself as the pianist. We know the force of feeling is inseparable from creativity itself; this is why feeling seeks expression, and why we can say, with Nick Cave, that "sorrow itself is a creative act" (2013, 7). Laura rediscovers her capacity to plumb the depths of her pain through art, which means to plumb the intensities of art and life itself. The creative force that courses through Rachmaninoff comes from the paradox between being anchored and overwhelmed. *Concerto for Piano No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18* (1901) becomes a "Love Song," expressing "an inexplicable longing, an unnamed and enigmatic yearning of the soul" (Cave 2013, 7).

Now we're in a love-grief scene and it howls with yearning.

The howl of heartbreak is one to be avoided.

Heartbreak is an unravelling of the subject, except that the pain is an expression of love i.e. haunted by ideation (it's the attachment that howls). The scene in which the characters swing from the chandelier suggests that they were having great sex too. I just wonder whether the elevation of their romantic love, paradoxically represented as taboo and as over and above the taboo it represents, expresses or denies "what's unbearable in negativity" (Berlant and Edelman 2014, ix).

"I felt so utterly humiliated and defeated and dreadfully, dreadfully ashamed" Laura (Celia Johnson) confesses.

"Self-respect matters, and decency. I can't go on any longer" (Lean 1945).

Laura's particular heartbreak is the outcome too of her humiliation—she couldn't live up to a normative ideal that she understood was key to the feelings of others.

#2. Circuits

I go to the theatre to collect one last scene. I want to exercise the nonsovereignty of the story. That right there is some serious optimism. What do I hope for? Nothing short of an open heart. I have learned that this is key to my ability to read and write. An open heart suggests an openness to others.

I was on countdown: 16 hours before leaving for Sydney. My very own grief city. A string of errands yes. But just one *real thing* to do before I leave. I know, as I make my way to the Empire Cinema, that love is a lot of theatrics. Despite the risk of these, I hope that love and theatre will come full circle on me. How else will I find your "capacity to repair" (Berlant 2008, 4)? I look for you in the theatre of love. One last look, before I leave. You can call me out on the stupidity (most everyone else *I am told* has this whole love/sex scene more sussed than me). I know this call can be out of concern: an open heart is hard won, and easily lost. But in this look, *something is going on* more than my feeling. This look gives out a cultural story—the nonsovereignty of a love/sex story, all the way from the crescendo of sensation in the love-grief scene, to the Tinder swipe; all the way from a Tinder match to seat D16.

In a description of the love scene the following juxtapositions come into play: gay vs. straight; sex vs. love; marriage vs. the love affair; film vs. theatre. Theatre's intimacy isn't visceral, as it is in, for example, *120 BPM* (Campillo 2017): we're not in the room, affectively proximate to the (too) real, (too) close fucking, or

dying body. Passionate love (the audience is moved to tears with the movement of it) occurs without visceral sex (it is the theatre after all). We see the face of the lover's emotion not the faces a lover makes. The challenge of intimacy beyond patriarchal sexuality admits to the prescience of these distinctions, and their role in the perseverance of questions of libido, commitment, affection, and attachment. The cultural politics of "[t]he love laws ... the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much," go on and on (Roy 1997, 33). The love laws travel in circuits. All we have to do now is work out what happens not only when sex is located in the bedroom of the middle-class couple, but in the quagmire of social media.

I swiped right on his face. (What kind of sentence is that?) He swiped right on me. This means we match. (I've substituted sentences for statements).

I quickly learn from other users that a match doesn't mean a thing because guys swipe right anyways. Though, in this instance, we arrange to meet, which I guess *does* mean something.

After an espresso martini (what are young people drinking these days?), he has a shot of tequila with me. Usually he wouldn't like it, but *this time* he did.

He walks home with me, but he doesn't kiss me.

On my sofa, he joins me for a cigarette. He rolls his own.

While we're talking, he puts his hand on my shoulder. It's so sweet and flattering. I enjoy it too much to wonder where he learned that.

We must have been talking Harvey Weinstein, though I can't think what for or why. But we must have been. Weinstein was in the air, about to enter conversation at any time.

"Kevin Spacey put his hand on my knee," he says.

To say that now, it's become so awkward! All of a sudden, we've said too much, without hardly saying anything at all.

In the moment, I think it's a sort of accolade: what nice young man wouldn't be flattered? Or perhaps my suitor wishes to communicate his desirability to me (well, if *Kevin Spacey* wanted some...). Not everyone can say that Kevin Spacey hit on them. I say now, with irony.

I find some entertainment in the fall of Spacey from the bright lights of Hollywood to my new friend's knee. We've all seen *The House of Cards* (2013-). I'll admit to the *schadenfreude* on my part, especially seen as Spacey was knocked back where I wasn't. I gloat, I admit it. Spacey missed out: *what a kisser!* But, even that's weird to say now. His status having changed from closet case to sexual predator changes the terms of the joke.

Weirdly, but not so weirdly because it was in the air, that story broke in the following weeks. Anthony Rapp alleges ... (you know the rest), later claiming that his allegation took inspiration from the women who had come out about their experience of Weinstein (Gajanan 2018). I use the metaphor of the closet intentionally. Its purposes multiply these days.

I am disturbed by the story and weirdly, or not so, disappointed in him (Spacey, that is). My disappointment quickly turns into anger towards the discourse that emerges: it's a moral panic; it's the sex wars. A *Guardian* columnist writes, literally, "How dare you, Kevin Spacey?" and he goes on to say:

Remember Section 28, introduced by Thatcher's government in 1988, barring the so-called promotion of homosexuality in schools? How its defenders justified the homophobic legislation on the grounds that gay men were deviants and perverts who threatened the nation's children? ... I bet you that homophobic bigots will use Spacey's case to press the case that LGBTQ people threaten children. (Jones 2018, n.p.)

The bet was on, but we don't know who won. Why is sexual politics overburdened with recycled tropes? What do these tropes do, other than angle the burden of representation? Jones' critique of the misrepresentation of homosexuality exemplifies the limits of normative optimism. What about the workplace culture of patriarchal privilege in which men's fantasies of sovereignty facilitate their self-serving behaviour and a system that protects aggressors?

Meanwhile, Spacey is taken out of the circuits of cultural production faster than you can say s-e-x-u-a-l ...

In *The Guardian's* Dating After #MeToo 'series,' another journalist levels that "if you kiss a person who doesn't want to be kissed, that's sexual assault" (Edelstein 2018, n.p.). I quickly check the UK law on sexual offences, which doesn't quite state that. The law uses the language of "sexual touching," which the journalist neglects to consider. Now, it's cultural law that matters—opinion and mob rule. "Should I ask my Date if I Can Kiss Her?" addresses men as the agents of sexual initiation with women. Sexual harassment is relocated within the domesticating 'lifestyle' discourse on casual sex and courtship, with little consideration of how relations of power, sex and intimacy are foregrounded by questions of power in the workplace (see Gallop and Berlant 2001).

Bumble's (2014) founder, Whitney Wolfe Herd, successfully sued Tinder for sexual harassment and discrimination (O'Connor 2017, n.p.). People describe Bumble as the "feminist Tinder," "focusing on the needs of one segment: women" (ibid.). We have feminism to thank for that? Following a match, the woman must initiate contact (apparently, Tinder's data say women don't). In any case, the platform doesn't interfere much in men's initiations—they simply initiate in response. Bumble's advertising is plastered on central London buses. It's a supercorporate-postfeminist-lifestyle-frenzy. So-and-so business woman joins the Bumble Family as a Bumble Ambassador. Users are invited to a Bizz Dinner on the theme of Advertising and Marketing. Programming Romance, a talk given in a Soho pub by the Branding Director, will focus on how Bumble is redefining digital dating. The Sofar Sounds events are transforming living rooms and retail shops into venues for secret, live shows, creating an immersive experience.

Maybe Feeld (2014) breaks the mould: a London based app for "open-minded couples and singles. Discover a space where you can explore your desires and find your people. Join solo or pair up with a partner, a lover or a curious friend." The website looks queer enough: "we believe nothing is more unpredictable or less binary than human desire." You got that right! Fantastically queer, until you consider that access to the platform depends upon you sharing your Facebook data—friends, photos, email—for the purposes of identity verification.

It's difficult to imagine that Grindr (2009) is less than 10 years old.

The 'swipe' has a cultural logic that can't be easily subverted because it is rearticulating so well a bunch of stuff that was there anyway. The swipe spreads.

A city bar serves the cocktail: "Hot or Not". (The reference is lost on the bartender, for whom "Hot" refers to the house-infused chilli tequila option.)

ITV's *Love Island* (2015–), successor to *Big Brother* (1999–) with more pool, bikini and bedroom, requires contestants to swipe 'In Real Life.' The objective of the game is to wind up *matched* in a *couple*. Contestants left out of a couple, i.e. not *swiped right on*, are more at risk of being dumped from the villa. To not be swiped right on is to lose the competition. *Love Island* is celebrated (by the TV industry) for bringing a generation of young viewers back to broadcast television.

A new app launches. Shapr (2018), it is a "networking app for professionals. This app lets you swipe right on your career. Instead of awkward dates, you get casual business meetings. Who doesn't love that?" Given what we already know about networking in the creative industries (McRobbie 2015), the concept of Tinder for work barely needs explanation. It barely needs explaining too, that men prefer causal business meetings to awkward dates. Why go on dates, with all the porn in the world at your fingertips (so to speak), and a long list of Tinder matches available for 'chat and more'?

I mark an undergraduate dissertation in which a student uses Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Love* to claim that Tinder is responsible for the dissolution of marriage. True, Bauman's claim that " 'relationship' is ... the sole game in town worth playing, despite its notorious risks" does warrant some merit in light of the popularity of dating apps (2003, viii). These apps *gamify* and *sexualise* dating, transforming the hook-up app into "an end in itself" (Chamorro-Premuzic 2014, n.p.). And by app, I mean us and our data. Moreover, the game takes the form of your gamble. Your gamble might risk your heart, or your desire, your night out, your time, your interest and attention, or your vulnerability to others—all that can be put at risk, but most especially the dignity that is essential to your status. It's remarkable that questions of gender and sexual difference are unaddressed in Bauman's claim that "if 'commitments are meaningless' while relations cease to be trustworthy and are unlikely to last, you are inclined to swap partnerships for networks" (2003, viii). Whose inclinations are these? Whose networks?

#3. Status

Such a relief, to burst from the theatre
 Into our cool, imaginary streets
 Where we know who's who and what's what,
 And command with Metrocards our destinations.¹

It's a breath of fresh air, jumping out of the theatre. But theatre jumps too—it's aesthetics compete for our attention in our "act of passing by" (de Certeau 1984, 97). Phenomena from microcelebrity to audit culture, networking, CCTV and mobile phone cameras, data analytics, and entrepreneurialism, all place us on stage. Reality TV is never far away.

The stage sets the scene for comparison, gives us terms with which to measure others, check how we ourselves measure up, and demonstrate that we are measured in our responses. Tinder profiles are linked to Spotify and Instagram. More than reflections of taste, networked profiles embed us within the social by traversing different spheres of social life (augmenting what is possible) and acting as technologies of interpellation (calling us into new ways of relating). Profiles are the aesthetic, ideational forms by which our digital footprints are generated—the basis for the "generative" rules of the algorithm (Lash, cited in Beer 2009, 994).

These "virtuals that generate a whole variety of actuals ... compressed and hidden," (ibid.) are at play in the production of our status. The profile is an instrument of status, and reputation is the means by which status communicates. The past isn't the past—what matters to humiliation is that it's a reoccurring present in which our reputations travel: the past can always be used to humiliate us. Because our capacity for judgement is so highly mediated, we often don't know who's who and what's what; but, simultaneously, a premium is placed on self-knowledge and self-representation. As the regulatory circuits of cultural production and consumption shrink and tighten in "algorithmic cultures," the status of our profile, outward facing and data loaded, comes to stand in for our social and cultural citizenship (Hall 1997; Striphos 2015).

Given that we internalise the historical stage—we imagine the exercise of power, entrapping ourselves within the logic by which it is exercised (Foucault 1977)—our failure to meet the expectations of others creates an experience of humiliation that always relates our self-worth back to the theatrics of normative values (Skeggs 1997; Tyler 2013). Our proper names are attached to proper faces with searchable histories, but, they are only ever instantiating representations. Nevertheless, we ‘follow’ one another’s names, lulled into thinking that we are following one another. The essence we encounter in the other, that disturbs or reifies our sovereignty, is mediated by *status*, constituting a further investment in normativity powered by the algorithm (Beer 2009; Striphas 2015). As we follow reputations we invest in a reputational economy that becomes increasingly hegemonic. This economy of reputation is the new cultural economy or political economy of culture. We try to command our own theatrics while our reputations dance on a screen before us. Whereas “[s]tories diversify; rumours totalize” (de Certeau 1984, 107).

“I don’t think anyone wants to be one of a hundred colours in a box,” Peggy (Elisabeth Moss) observes in 1960, as imagined in 2007 (*Mad Men*, Season 1, Episode 6). Her observation still resonates as a reflection on the nature of commodification. Advertising rests on schemas of individuation and as these schemas operate in ways that are increasingly individual, e.g. through tracking and targeting, they increasingly confine social value to the consumer while simultaneously extracting economic value from the depletion of the social. The association of individuality with consumer power is also increasingly linked to a new type of social status that incorporates gender as a social construct and embodied style through a personalised aesthetics of the self. Status is shaped through people’s subjective identifications with the categorisations of identity that stratify the social, as well as by consumer power, yet appears to be greater than the sum of its parts. Our positioning within social media, within the whole scene of networked platform media, hinges upon a concept of status that is linked to the use of profiles to communicate reputational value—from the value of the workplace, to lovers, to presidents. It is, as Erving Goffman claimed some time ago, “the individual who is disqualified from full social experience” (1963, Preface). Perhaps. Though one’s “social identity” (2) would now be better understood as one’s reputation—the value that is produced in the affective and communicative exchanges that constitute one’s status.

#4. Stakes

Desire itself brings us down at least a peg or two. No one *falls* for anyone, anymore. People are too guarded.

Even to have wanted, is to have fallen. Wanting is risking your status in a zero-sum game.

He is the perfect stranger. The "paradox" of the stranger is that their "attachment invokes disconnection" (Feldman 2012, 303).

A woman is never a stranger. As soon as she feels, she falls below the line. Despite her best intensions, she might throw out a look.

Meanwhile, there is no stranger as such. We all have proper names now—a reputation.

Meanwhile, we are all strangers now: the stranger "presents the synthesis" of attachment and detachment that typifies our reputation (Simmel 1971, 143).

Meanwhile, you never know until you've already fallen, when you're being *catfished* or when you've fallen in love.

I know there's no writing without risking yourself, but I don't know what I'm risking by writing. This risk transpires in the experience of *shame*, which has something to do with writing's transgressive difficulties and pleasures (Probyn 2005).

We might assume that sex invites the risk of humiliation because sex is shrouded in shame. Especially women's sex. Especially same-sex sexuality. Nowadays, sex is shrouded in social media.

I try to get my head around the paradox: "no one really cares what or how I write but me, but, I can't separate writing from my sense of self in relation to others"—the concept of the audience is present. That's the historical stage, the audience; that's the optimism. We throw out a look and hope for the best. Optimism without guarantees.

It's no coincidence that my writing about Tinder is analogous to my writing about writing. Tinder's as much subject as object: Tinder writes itself. The imaging, the writing, the texting, the swiping, is Tinder's writing. The textuality of Tinder puts something at stake—something that combines with what would have been already at stake (In Real Life). However risky though, the stakes of Real Life are better because people retain access to the mere facts of one another's tangibility. In a range of ways their self-possession is less at risk of humiliation. We're tricking ourselves if we think that Tinder protects us from the shame of rejection.

Silvan Tomkins asked, "How can loss of face be more intolerable than loss of life?" (from Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 136). Could there be a less stable referent, or a more personal one, with which to trade? It becomes hard to throw out a look once we lose face. Losing face, we experience "the sick feeling of being exposed as thinking we are more than we really are" (Miller 1993, ix). I guess that's also the risk with writing. It's "the humiliation of having our poses of competence undercut by our own ineptitude" (ix).

You have to have an optimism that something is going to work out. This is already a kind of thinking we are more.

Optimism for something better renders us subject to the impact of a bad evaluation: "one must have expected good things to have come from the other person before the other's contempt produces shame" (Tomkins in Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 138). The way we care what others think is usually implied, for example, in an investment that is made possible by a transaction. Such as: I take the time to reply to his message. Taking the time to reply casts out optimism. They say they do, but people don't know what they're looking for. They use Tinder to look: what is the look of optimism one gives out as they select a picture for their profile? The intimacy of the face of the lover becomes the face of optimism.

Optimism, the stage: the idea upon which we base our performance; our perception of history and of mattering; our imagining of what other people can see or care about when we select photos for our Tinder profile.

Optimism, the "over-articulate tenderness," and "too much intensity" that scares off new lovers (Coward circa 1920s, quoted in Brief Encounter 2007).

Optimism, the phantasm of mutual pleasure and synchronicity; the fantasy of self-knowledge and control.

If our heart is at stake, everything is at stake.

It doesn't matter how many times you write "No Strings Attached", and "Not Looking for a Relationship" in your bio, sex is still relational. Especially good sex, and especially bad. The experience is in excess—something's disturbed, yo! Even if you pay—although paying can make the terms of the transaction clearer. Whatever, there has to be an exchange, because the relationality of sex is us exchanging.

Being on a date with you, texting you, swiping you—it's not as simple as being looked at and judged; not being right or good enough. It's not just being rejected, though no one likes that (in any case, 'rejection' is making such a song and dance about it). It's not even the switch, from being something ("let's fuck") to nothing (I keep only your phone number and a vague memory). It's the way that all this gets mixed in with the shame of the mistake: you thought that you were good enough. It was such an implied, assumed thought that you didn't even think it. You simply thought, I wore my best for you. We tend to distract ourselves from the shame we experience in the knowledge of having an unmet expectation of positive appraisal.

"Humiliation is the price we pay for not knowing how others see us" (Miller 1993, x).

Not only is our status lowered, we discover that we are wrong about where we thought we were: we were wrong about ourselves. Our knowledge about ourselves was flawed, and our assumptions about where we fit in the pecking order were made in error. If stigma "constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity" then this discrepancy facilitates the humiliation we experience in being wrong about ourselves: we are embarrassed and ashamed not only because we realise that we are the subject of a "spoiled identity," but because we didn't know that we were (Goffman 1963, 3). This failure constitutes a specific type of injury in a world in which self-knowledge is premium. A world in which the networked profile is an instrument of status, and reputation is the means by which status communicates, is full of intervals in which you might be wrong about yourself. Platform media exacerbate and complicate the discrepancies between virtual and actual social life in ways we don't understand—in ways about to trip us up. You may even be "seen to be putting on airs by simply being out of place, by being on the other's turf" (Miller 1993, 11): yet we might not even have a place "[w]here we know who's who and what's what," and what better description of being online?

In every swipe and chat, the exchange reproduces your status and you play with the possibility of being wrong about where you think you are in the world, which means being wrong about yourself. Teasing plays on the insecurity of self-knowledge; to humiliate someone is to deny their self-knowledge, to injure the pride they take in their humility. This play is gendered: if a woman is an academic and a man is a trader, or a strategist, or a website editor, she will get used to micro-humiliation—the more status he has, the more he has something to prove about his place in the world. So, she probably makes self-deprecating jokes. As London (Juno Temple) says, to “spare your fragile male ego” – “I thought we were both on the same page as to what we expected / wanted of the encounter,” says a guy I met twice (Kaboom 2010). This is optimism in the form of an idea about mutuality. But this notion of equal status is refracted through gender: “[D]o you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from someone who already exists in the margins? It’s not humility, it’s humiliation. I have built a career out of self-deprecating humour ... I put myself down in order to speak” (Gadsby 2018). Changing the joke of humiliation is a radical challenge to its terms.

“Jordan Peterson is right,” the profile says. The profile responds to my question of whether the photo used is really of them: “Men can’t say anything,” the profile says. The profile had been catfishing—catfishing cum trolling. Perhaps I shouldn’t reveal on my profile that I’m an academic: the revelation of status-related information is part of the structure of being targeted by a Jordan Peterson follower. The profile lets me know that I’m just a joke. When I throw out my desire for face-value, I appear vulnerable to tricks. The profile withholds its face on several levels and so is less likely to lose it. The profile is a mask, an avatar. I am stuck with the face-value of something faceless (it might even be a bot). The profile watches you lose yours. The profile lets you know it got off.

Being tricked is *de facto* humiliation: the person loses face because they didn’t know they were being tricked. People are using Tinder to bring one another down a peg or two; that is a problem, but also this humiliation game is on a continuum with the self-deprecating humour that many of us with minoritized identities have been using as an everyday strategy of survival. Really, self-deprecation offers little recourse for resistance.

So, we might decide that love’s gamble isn’t worth it. It isn’t worth the game. If we’re gambling with our hearts, we’re gambling with our status, and in our society that’s near enough gambling with everything.

#5. Coda

He likes me too,
he tells me with his mineral breakfast.
He's got soft ears and rosy cheeks. Like
literally, a cherub fell into my bed.

An actor and a poststructuralist,
virtually impossible to know
which one of us is faking it.
We are both in the business
of impression management.
Let us count the ways that we fit together.
Every which way we go, we fit.
Every actor needs a stage; every writer needs a muse.
"Every barista needs an espresso machine," he jokes.
He kills it.

He lounges in my bed as if it's his own—
even calls me over,
before he gets up to leave.
"I might disappear again," he says.
If he doesn't have time,
he doesn't have time.

I watch his thumb curl.
The thought of him with other women is way too raw.
I was having fun
up until a certain moment.

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Endnotes

1. James Richardson, 'In Shakespeare', poem, *The New Yorker*, February 12 2007. Shared by Elizabeth Stephens on Facebook.

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